# Where the New Steps Come From

We hunted out the dancing places and watched what was being done.

*By BERNARD HUGHES.*

OUT of Chicago, that city which the effete Easterner pretends to pity while intensely admiring its vim and enterprise, have come, the dancers say, many good things. It is true that certain changes have to be made before these original steps can be admitted into society, but this does not alter the fact that Chicago possessed the germ.

There's a knee dance which has taken the dancers of the West captive and all of them are practicing it. The knee dance, I have heard, is the last word of vulgarity. Making its entrance right after censors of the dance, in conclave assembled, decided to clean up a little if not reform dancing entirely, the knee dance might be expected to make but a wintry fight for its life. No so; it won out at the start and the modern whirlers as far East as Buffalo have taken it up. But it weakens, I am told, as it travels toward the rising sun and by the time it reaches New York the movements may be reduced to something quite respectable.

Or it may come in full power. Who can tell? The Bunny-hug, the Grizzly-bear, those now forgotten forebears of the one-step and the fox trot, likewise started in Chicago, and these in their trip to the Atlantic coast didn't weaken. On the contrary.

There is a big dance hall being conducted in Chicago's South Side, in one of those districts to reach which at night it is necessary to penetrate great areas of darkness, so that before you are engulfed in the flood of light that pours out of its doors and windows you feel that already you've had an adventure. It is run by a man from New Orleans who is "almost white," and he is the creator of the "knee dance" and several of its popular predecessors.

As was the case of New York's own little dance hall in the crazy period of ten years and more ago, the *Sans Souci*, Chicago's miscegenated dance hall, has caught the fancy of society; everybody patronizes it, but few can explain what takes them there.

The dancers know. Florence Walton, considered by the cognoscenti as a splendid exponent on the stage of ballroom dancing, knows. In defining its drawing power she said at once that this was due to the novel steps constantly being shown there.

"The popularity of dancing was never greater than it is to-day," said she, "but in this as in everything else there is a constant appetite for something new and it must be fed. I believe thoroughly in cleaning up dancing and I wouldn't be thought to countenance many of the things I have seen in that Chicago dancing place. But I go there every time I am in Chicago and I never go without learing something new.

"Maurice, my former dancing partner, and I never visited a strange city without hunting out the dancing places and watching what was being done. In this way we picked up a great many ideas, crude enough, certainly, but having the germ of the dance in them.

"We made a thorough study of the dancing to be seen on the East Side of New York and not only found there steps that we were able to incorporate in our own dancing, but more than this we were sometimes enabled to understand where certain dances that had puzzled us came from and what they meant.

"Folk dances, like folk songs, serve as a basis for dances that fill the popular need. You hear of operas that come from folk songs; these have passed through a composer's mind and been transformed, but without losing their simplicity of melody and passion. It is the same with dances by the people; one learns how to do them, and that is easy; but one also learns what they were meant to express and then tries to express the same thing modernly, and that is hard."

According to this exponent of the dance, grace, which seemed for a long time neglected, is now in the ascendant. Jazz has its good points, she thinks, but they were too long obscured by the shriek and violent angular gesture. Becoming more popular, even in vaudeville, are the soft, sensuous measures.

It is not necessary to be a master of this delightful art to appreciate that in the crowded East Side of New York there are children growing up who have the fire and snow of the dance in their blood. The dance isn't all passion, you must know, but it is sometimes cold and pallid. All varieties of it are to be seen over there, exhibited on the streets sometimes, as also in the little breathing places that are called parks.

It is the children, though, that show unconsciously the dances that have their roots in Greece, in Russia, in southern Italy and the Balkans. These little ones only need the inspiration of a strain of ancient melody when they instantly give an exhibition of dances containing steps that no one ever taught them but that they were born knowing.

Their older sisters and brothers have lost the inherited art, as they shortly will lose it themselves, in acquiring from their American comrades the American dance, including the jazz forms it has taken on.

In my eager desire to dance up to date I myself went among the people for encouragement and instruction. It was that crazy time before the war when everybody irrespective of age or station was dancing or trying to. I was trying to.

It hit me hard—this craze—and in fact all my life I had been trying to learn to dance. Oddly enough, in the privacy of my own apartment I seem to be made of rhythm; every movement is music. I can dip like Pavlowa in The Swan, I can leap like Najinsky in The Specter of the Rose. There were often times when, flushed by the grace and agility with which I had accomplished a difficult terpsichorean feat, I regretted that there was no audience present to applaud me.

The ordinary dances of the period referred to—one-step, fox trot, maxixe, etc.—should have presented no difficulties to a master of rhythm such as I was. Yet when I got on a dancing floor in public I could not perform to advantage; my feet appeared to be not mates, or they were self-conscious or else the right one was jealous of the left one.

I would have been obtuse not to perceive after several polite rebuffs that as a society dancer I was not a success, and yet as I couldn't "make my feet behave" my next best bet was the lower strata; I went to the East Side for my dancing.

It was cheap—five cents for a dance—and partners were abundant. No introductions required. Dancing floors were usually spacious and their waxed condition of the best. It is true that some of the men might have washed oftener; there was one strapping fellow with his neck tied up in a cloth who was always running into me.

For fifty cents I could dance till I dropped. I was in my element, and a frown now and then by a partner when I got out of step or walked on her dress—the time preceded the short gowns of the flapper period—didn't matter, she was a helpless stranger anyway.

These East Side girls could dance—dance so well that a defective partner was not so very noticeable.

A waltz form at the moment popular was the hesitation; it was slow and elegant, something like a minuet in its graceful dips and glides. I loved it the first time I saw it and took private lessons. Then over I went to the Grand Central Palace to put what I had learned into practice. My first partner was a tall, buxom young woman who had squeezed her feet into black satin slippers a few sizes too small for her. We had been out on the floor but a brief while when she suddenly stopped and said:

"Say, what you need is some lessons."

I didn't argue the question with her, particularly as she informed me at once that she was an instructor and if I felt like paying 25 cents for a ticket she would take me into a quiet corner, a sort of eddy in the dance, and administer the lesson. I bought the ticket.

In spite of my zeal the lesson availed little. Returning to the floor proper, we tried it again with little better luck. She flushed till her face was quite red and stopped short:

"Of all the dubs! . . ." said she. "But I guess you gotta have your money's worth!"

And with that she picked me off the floor as if I were a doll and, holding me limp in her arms, for I was too surprised to struggle, she finished the waltz by herself in perfect time and measure.

It is a theory of Bert French, who is himself a recognized dancer and a director of dancing—it was he who put on the dances of the Music Box Revue—that new dances rarely originate in one individual but that like the ballad of ancient times they are the product of many minds and it is difficult to find out who starts them. Somebody does, of course, and somebody else adds to the original bit and develops it. After him others work the dance over till finally the step gets beyond the amateur stage and professionals try what they can make of it.

Ever since I have been dancing myself and even more since I have been interested in arranging ensemble dances for the theater one great and never-failing resource has been the East Side. It's true that I go there for characters as well as dances, and the quarter is equally rich in both.

Since the world war that has distributed families so widely and sent the people from middle Europe over here in such numbers one can find representative dances, costumes and all complete down there. I believe that this new element is going to make our dances for all sorts of occasions more picturesque.

But rhythm was always there. Good, natural dancing was always to be seen down in Grand, Houston and other streets of the lower East Side. Girls and boys who never learned a step in any dancing school are nevertheless beautiful dancers. I mean beautiful. The reason is that they are born with a rhythmical sense. While that isn't everything in the equipment of a dancer, nobody can dance who hasn't got it. And don't think that it is found strongest in any one people. The Poles and Czechs have it even more than the Spaniards, and if you could see a party made up principally of Irish or Welsh dancers you would be likely to think they had the monopoly of rhythm. Fact is, it is an international endowment, only it skips a great many persons of every country.

The story of a new waltz with a far from complete investigation into its origin confirms what many dancers say, which is that a hundred persons may be concerned in it. This waltz is known as "Say It While Dancing."

The air started as a song composed by an English musician and in this guise it had a kind of success, but it did not come to this country as a song. Somebody heard it in a London music hall and abstracted one phrase. To this phrase that somebody annexed a dance step.

Then, according to Miss Walton's version, Paul Whiteman, before giving it to his orchestra to play, went back to the song, took another strain or two, eliminated something, added something and produced a new arrangement.

The new waltz, calling for slow, graceful dancing, is now on the top of popularity on the stage and it is expected to find its way to all the dance floors.